Ex-Officer Reveals Pentagon

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By John Hanrahan
Washington Post Staff Writer

A high-ranking retired naval officer warned yesterday that the Pentagon has a special investigative unit with the authority to conduct the same kinds of clandestine operations as the White House "plumbers" whose activities have come under investigation in the Watergate affair.

Retired Rear Adm. Eugene LaRocque, director of the private, Washington-based Center for Defense Information, said that the Pentagon's special unit, the Defense Investigative Service, has "virtually no limitation on the type of surveillance and actions it may undertake" and is subject to no review by Congress.

Air Force Col. Mason W. Gant III, executive officer for DIS, denied that DIS was a potential "plumbers" unit and said it was strictly limited to background checks of Defense Department personnel or persons employed by defense contractors.

Gant said the background checks were needed for new personnel or for granting security clearances to persons handling classified information.

LaRocque—a frequent critic of the Pentagon—made his comments in remarks here to a conference, sponsored by the Institute for Policy Studies, on the issue of impeaching President Nixon, and in an interview after the conference. Gant responded in a telephone interview.

In the interview, LaRocque said he had no information that the DIS had gone beyond its ostensible purpose of checking the backgrounds of Defense Department-connected personnel.

However, he said, the potential for illegal and improper activities, such as those conducted by the White House "plumbers" is there, under the catchall provision in the DIS charter authorizing it to conduct "other special investigations as the Secretary of Defense may direct."

The "plumbers" was the name given to a unit set up in the White House in the summer of 1971, according to Mr. Nixon, for the purpose of stopping news leaks damaging to national security. The unit, which included E. Howard Hunt Jr. and G. Gordon Liddy, later to become convicted Watergate conspirators, has since been accused of committing illegal acts, including breaking into the office of Dr. Lewis Fielding, the psychiatrist to Pentagon Papers' defendant Daniel Ellsberg.

LaRocque provided a reporter with copies of the DIS charter and back-up documents which outline the authority of the little-publicized agency.

The charter indicates that the agency is authorized to operate only in the United States and to "maintain liaison" with and "render appropriate assistance to" various civilian and military law enforcement and intelligence agencies, as well as to "provide personnel security investigative support" to the National Security Agency. LaRocque said this provision may be designed to let the highly-secret NSA engage in domestic, rather than the foreign activities it is authorized to engage in.

One of the back-up directives, which appears to authorize the unit to investigate persons who undertake "subversion of loyalty, discipline, or morale" of the military, LaRocque said, raises again the spectre of the military spying on civilians, a practice which came to light a few years ago and which the military says has since ceased.

Gant said that the DIS has engaged in "only two or three special investigations" over the last year, over and above the personnel checks the agency performs. Gant cited unpublicized testimony by the unit's director, Air Force Brig. Gen. Joseph J. Cappucci, to a House subcommittee early this year, in which Cappucci said that the "two or three" special probes involved trying to get to the source of "security material that appeared in the press."

Gant said he could understand why LaRocque was concerned at the catchall language in the unit's charter, but said this was put in there only "to leave the option open to the Secretary (of Defense) that if he wanted someone checked out for criminal or counterintelligence matters, he could."

Clandestine Unit

In the conference yesterday, LaRocque and Richard Falk, professor of international law at Princeton, warned that a long, drawn-out impeachment proceeding could lead President Nixon to launch a military effort abroad to divert attention from impeachment, or to impose military rule at home to deal with some fabricated crisis.